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Passing on democracy: A look at discourse in post-9/11 animated film

Anna Sable

The genre of animated film is often one that goes unexamined for the broader cultural narratives in which it is inscribed. Films, including children's animated film, reflect the national dialogues at the time in which they are produced, drawing on relevant events and social practices to create significant and culturally meaningful stories. The post-9/11 era signifies a period of national crisis, a time of war abroad and on "terror" itself, and increased vigilance both globally and within the United States. Animated films released after 2001 like *Toy Story 3* (2010), *The Incredibles* (2004), and *Cars* (2006) reflect popular narratives of colonization, democratization, and exceptionalism necessitated by U.S. foreign policy after September 11th.

Film appeals to large spheres of the public through fun, entertainment, trivialization, and distancing from true events. Children's films produced through the lens of fun and entertainment is seen as too unrelated and "innocent" to be read critically (Giroux). But creating distance and trivialization through film is one of the primary ways that narratives about American imperialism and the 'war on terror' are disseminated to the public, particularly since the events of 9/11 (Sturken, "Comfort, Irony, and Trivialization: The Mediation of Torture"). Scholars agree that children's film "starts at an early age" and the "system of forgetting and assumption are integrated early on" (Ono 92). As a result, conventions about democratization, international politics, and America's powerful role in global issues start during formative years, integrated as an inherent assumption of duty and normative cultural tradition. Sturken contends that the negotiation of the "nation's relationship to global politics and world history" through media images and popular culture is a "tourism of history" that creates distance and trivialization from true events ("Comfort, Irony, and Trivialization: The Mediation of Torture" 425). Film engages national narratives about world events, and the viscosity through which these national narratives

are encoded is central to enacting power and rationality (Sturken, "Comfort, Irony, and Trivialization: The Mediation of Torture" 427). The innocence of the children's film genre and its accessibility to consumers not only distributes messages to broad audiences but also integrates dialogues about American identity and the country's role internationally as a cultural script. Movies emerging in the post-9/11 era are not just fairy tales about talking toys, superhuman families, and a world run by racecars but rather embedded cultural scripts about America's role in international democracy, American exceptionalism, and the passing down of these narratives to the younger generations.

Democracy in Toy Story 3

Toy Story 3 focuses on the story of a group of toys that belong to Andy, a boy about to leave for college. The impending change in their lives makes the toys wonder if they will be thrown away, donated, or put into storage. Due to a misunderstanding, every toy other than Woody believes they have been thrown away and out of fear they donate themselves to Sunnyside daycare to avoid their perceived fate. Unfortunately, a gang of toys terrorizes and imprisons them once they voice their concerns about the conditions in Sunnyside. The toys then resolve to escape and through their efforts Lots-o'-huggin' Bear, the daycare dictator, is thrown into the dumpster. Lotso also wrestles Woody into the dumpster, and everyone is taken to the dump while attempting to rescue him. At the dump Andy's toys try to evade the incinerator and they are saved at the last minute. Woody and the others finally return to Andy's house where they get into a box destined for the attic. Woody, who spent a portion of the film stuck at a little girl Bonnie's house, ultimately makes the choice to go to a newer, younger owner and he writes her address on the box intended for the attic. Andy sees the address and takes the toys to Bonnie's, where he leaves them to be played with instead of keeping them in storage. At the end

of the movie the toys get a note from the daycare telling them how they have abolished the system that previously ran Sunnyside.

A key element to establishing Woody as the protagonist is the creation of his exceptionalism. The epitome of American strength, labor, morality, and determination, the cowboy represents the concept of Susan Jeffords' "hard body" (24). Jeffords contends that the hard body is indefatigable, strong, moral and reminiscent of the Reagan era politics central to an American emblem of masculinity (24). The icon of the cowboy evokes Reagan-era type masculinity, which Jeffords describes as chopping wood, and riding on a ranch. Similarly, representations and terminology that convey imagery of Native American military encounters contain a powerful heritage metaphor that "draws on narratives of U.S. colonialism, triumphalism... that operated in discourses about Native Americans in the past" (Silliman 237).

Woody's embodiment of this powerful heritage metaphor as a cowboy positions him as the very American protagonist and hard body (see fig. 1).



Figure 1. Woody and his sidekick Jess take down train robbers during the first scene of the film

Even after Woody

discovers that Sunnyside

is a "place of ruin and despair ruled by an evil bear" (*Toy Story 3*) he still insists on returning to save his friends and his actions also position him symbolically as the moral compass, his bravery and determination rising from these ideals. Woody is not simply considered a democratic protagonist because he symbolizes the idealized American past, but also because of the ways in

which he interacts with Andy's other toys. The discussions within the circle of toys resemble a town hall meeting where each individual has the ability to express doubt, fears, and alternative opinions without terror of persecution. The features that characterize a liberal democracy are "rule of law, representational government, state accountability through a system of checks and balances, separation of powers, and protection of individual rights and liberties..." (Lokaneeta). The liberal atmosphere encouraged by Woody contrasts starkly with the environment of Sunnyside daycare and its ruler, Lots-o'-huggin' Bear.

Lotso's cruel and duplicitous personality represents the antithesis of Woody's American moral compass and democratic principles. Jeffords in her description of the errant body suggests that the "soft body" (24) is often feminine and racialized in comparison to the American hard body; Lotso is a giant, pink, strawberry-scented bear made for cuddling and he is considerably less masculine than the protagonist. Not only is Lotso feminized in comparison to Woody's heterosexual masculinity (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo), but he is also weak and disabled, equipped with a cane and a limp and unable to personally act out the violence which he dictates. In addition to his actual physical "softness", Lotso demonstrates an agenda based upon deceiving Andy's toys when they first arrive at Sunnyside and maintaining a government system that feeds off of torture, fear, and panopticism.

When Buzz Lightyear, another hard body male protagonist, tries to request that he and the other toys be moved to a nicer location, he stumbles upon Sunnyside's corrupt ruling system dominated by back alley gambling and cigar-smoking thugs. Upon noticing him, the thugs capture and tie him to a chair, pull a bag over his head, and shine a florescent bulb into his eyes. At first Lotso releases him under the guise that the treatment had been an unfortunate misunderstanding and he offers Buzz alone a position among the higher levels within the daycare

(see fig. 3). Buzz Lightyear refuses and states, “I can’t, we’re [Andy’s toys] a family, and families stick together.” Lotso then has Buzz held down, opened up, and restored to “demo mode” which resets his memory (see fig. 4). Immediately Lotso transforms into the primary antagonist, and because all the henchmen answer to his rules and his interpretations of what can and cannot be done, it is at this point that Lotso solidifies his role as the dictator of the day care (see fig. 5). According to Buescher the first act of torture occurs as a demonstration of irrational governmentality (Buescher *forthcoming*). Lotso’s irrationality becomes apparent as he punishes Buzz for his loyalty to his family of other toys. Foucault also notes torture that does not maintain distance between punisher and the punished, or does not remove the act of torture from the public spectacle, works to transform the “executioner” into a criminal and the tortured into “the object of pity or admiration” (“Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” 9). Lotso neither keeps “proper distance” as a representation of his ruling state (Sturken, “Comfort, Irony, and Trivialization: The Mediation of Torture” 427), nor does he remove himself from the direct act of torturing Buzz Lightyear. In fact, he directly orders and participates in the torture of Buzz Lightyear, which confers on him a wholly negative characterization. Foucault continues to describe that within the spectacle of “modern punishment and on the part of those who dispense it, there is a shame in punishing” (Foucault, “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” 10). In addition to transforming into a shameful character with which torture is associated, Lotso diversifies his forms of punishment from physical torture to “an economy of suspended rights” (11) and use of a panoptic prison system in Sunnyside daycare.

Once Sunnyside is first glimpsed through the eyes of Woody, the resemblance to a prison system is immediately obvious. The doors are locked and a towering, 8-foot cement fence surrounds the building. A toy informant describes to Woody that “guards”, who also wander the

grounds throughout the night, patrol outside the building. At the center of the system sits the stuffed monkey or the “eye in the sky” (*Toy Story 3*), who watches the daycare cameras for any sign of unrest. The monkey’s propensity for constant vigilance is underscored in his eerie, unblinking stare that searches the camera monitors for disobedience. Michel Foucault’s description of Bentham’s prison system is a “panoptic mechanism [that] arranges spatial utilities that makes it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately” (“Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” 200). This panoptic visibility “is a guarantee of order” whose major effect is “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the



Figure 2. The monkey watches the camera monitors for signs of unrest

automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” 200-201). Lotso forces a panoptic prison system upon the protagonists through the

constant presence of guards and

surveillance, and the act of doing so is not justified. Throughout the film, Andy’s toys have no desire other than to find a home where they may be played with, and upon discovering that they do not like Sunnyside they simply ask to leave. Lotso’s polarized and extreme aversion to the departure of Woody and his friends portray him to be an unreasonable and undemocratic ruler who enacts forms of torture and imprisonment as ways to assert his unnecessary control.

Following the toys’ decision to leave Sunnyside, Lotso forces them into prison-like boxes where a brainwashed Buzz Lightyear watches them (see fig. 6). Mr. Potatohead is punished most severely when sentenced to spend the night in the sandbox where he is deprived of privileges like

light, heat, and sound. Foucault continues his discussion on punishment by arguing that “it might be objected that imprisonment, confinement, forced labor... are ‘physical penalties’: unlike fines, for example, they directly affect the body” (“Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” 11). Chappell also notes that in threat governmentality violence is directed at ‘risky bodies’, and evaluated through the racialized panopticon of threat (316). By creating a system in which all toys are constantly surveyed, constantly subject to the potential of physical violence through torture, imprisonment, or sensory deprivation, Lotso’s reign reveals itself as one of dictatorship and fear, and it demands Lotso’s removal by Woody and the institution of the democratic ideals which he embodies.

Once Andy’s toys are finally able to bypass the panoptic monkey, sneak through the rounds of guards, and scale the prison wall to the garbage shoot (the only escape), they are finally confronted by the last obstacle between themselves and home. Lotso stands in front of the toys with his henchmen and insists that the only way out is either in the form of trash or as his docile subjects. This scene is particularly important because it emphasizes the schism between democracy, which Woody and his friends represent and enact through a collective escape plan, and Lotso’s dictatorship that relies on the subjugation of unwilling bodies. Woody and the others “solicit their viewers’ support and appear to occupy solid (and therefore unquestionable) moral ground by taking a critical stance that positions the lone protagonists outside repressive cultures dominated by mindless bureaucracies” (Giroux 134). It is in this scene that Woody and the others most embody democratic resistance. Just before Lotso is thrown away, Barbie yells, “Authority should derive from the consent of the governed not from the threat of force” (Toy Story 3). Subsequently members of Lotso’s government defect and he is tossed into the trash, thereby validating a claim to democracy rather than dictatorship. After Lotso is overthrown and the toys



Figure 3. Lotso reacts to Buzz's answer



Figure 4. Buzz is dragged into a chair before being switched to demo mode

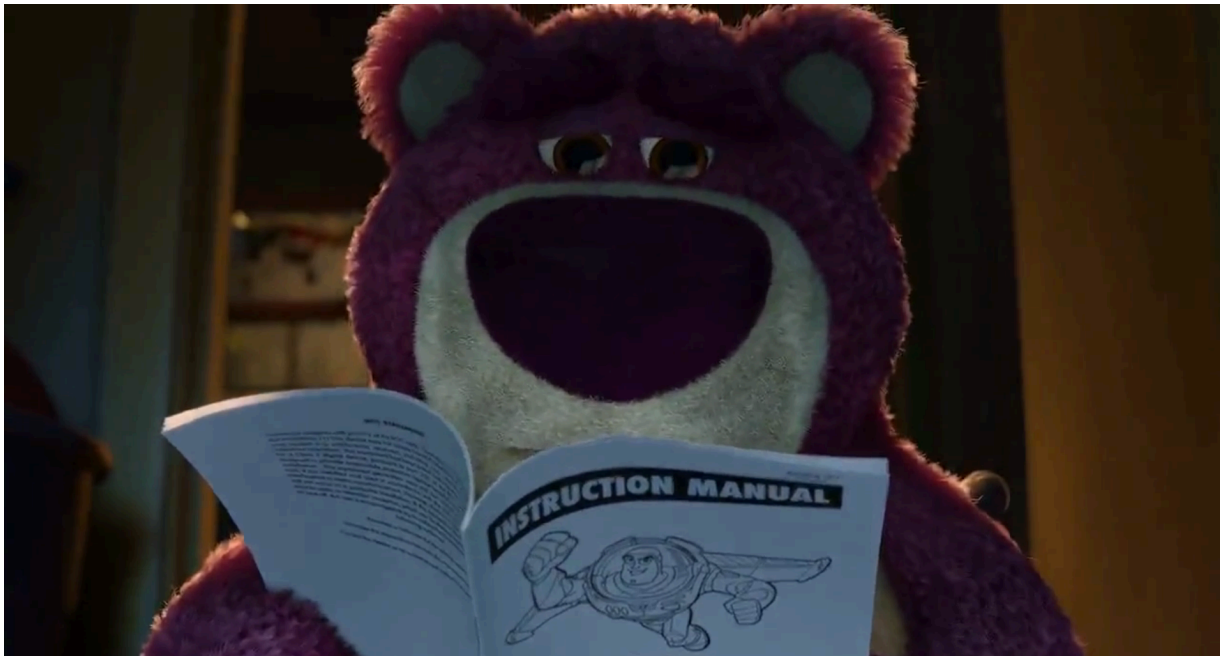


Figure 5. Lotso learns how to reset Buzz to demo mode



Figure 6. Lotso and his henchmen oversee the imprisonment of Andy's toys

find a new home, they receive a letter from Sunnyside now run by Barbie and Ken. Returning to Buescher's discussion of the three acts of torture, the new government run by Barbie and Ken comes about as the result of not Act III torture, but violence.

The violence against Lotso that leaves him to be lost in the dump was a "necessary exception to protect the neocolonial facade of family/nation from the imminent danger posed by the other's presence" (8). The violence performed by Woody and the others that would have been immoral if enacted by Lotso was necessitated because he already stood in opposition to the protagonist and the democracy represented by Andy's toys. Not only do Andy's toys prevail in saving themselves from Lotso and Sunnyside, but they also free an entirely separate group of toys from oppression by a dictator, leaving Barbie behind to carry on the legacy of Woody's form of fair government.

Neocolonialism emerges as a means to justify the exploitation of subject peoples by creating a narrative of liberation. It surfaces as "a subtext within culture; the colonial meaning exists metaphorically, just under the threshold of perceptibility, and therefore needs to be unearthed" (Ono 15). Neocolonial texts reflect liberation/exploitation narratives and reproduce them, and the discovery and dictatorship narratives function to avoid evident scripts of neocolonialism (Ono 3) while also legitimating them by creating an "other" or an antagonist that necessitates the intervention of the neocolonial state. *Toy Story 3* partially encodes a neocolonial narrative, one of democratic intervention justified by the threat of violence. Much of the democracy and liberation narrative also echoes current political debates in the post-9/11 period. The American narrative of freedom and democracy that is embodied in the film reflects Sturken's earlier noted "tourism of history". Media images and popular culture retell the tale of current events through distancing and trivialization, and through *Toy Story 3* global debates

about U.S. involvements abroad are distanced and trivialized via the medium of animated film. Political arguments in favor of the war in Iraq are constructed in similar ways as in *Toy Story 3*, by drawing on tropes of dictatorship and cruelty to innocents to legitimate democratic interventions, while in reality also engaging the neocolonial narrative by sidestepping the potential for other motivations. The role of the U.S. after 9/11 has been one of international police, reflecting an approach to global policy that began as early as the Monroe Doctrine.

American Exceptionalism and The Incredibles

The Incredibles follows the life of Mr. Incredible and his family after his fall from fame. In the “glory days” Mr. Incredible (Bob Parr) and other superheroes saved people from a variety of disasters until the victims they rescued began to sue them for damages. The government shut down the superhero program and relocated all of the supers, forcing them to lead lives and create careers as normal people would. Mr. Incredible and his wife, Elastigirl (Helen Parr), proceed to have a family with three children, all which have super powers. Bob is stuck in the banality of his average life until he receives a strange message asking him to use his superpowers to deactivate a learning robot for a private company. This trajectory leads Bob into revitalizing his superself, having his supersuit repaired, and eventually returning to the private company’s island to disarm yet another robot. Unfortunately, he discovers the owner of the company is his old #1 fan, Buddy, who has developed his own technology so that he, too, can be super. Buddy still has resentment towards Bob, and Mr. Incredible discovers he has been eliminating the remaining supers using the robot so that no one will be more powerful than he is. Out of fear due to Bob’s absence, Helen navigates a plane to the island’s coordinates with the children on board. Buddy, now using the moniker of Syndrome, shoots down the plane and launches his plan to have the robot attack the city. The family of Incredibles then reunites and works together to destroy both

Syndrome and the city-attacking robot. The film finishes with the government's gratitude and promise that they will aid the supers so that they may be able to return to hero work.

Once again the creation of the protagonist is pivotal to the meaning of the film, but even more pertinent is the Incredibles' evident exceptionalism in conjunction with their American qualities. The most obvious differentiation between the Incredibles and normal citizens is their superpowers. Bob is stronger and larger than any of the men pictured during the film, his muscles so apparent that his body resembles an inverted triangle (see fig. 7 & 8). Susan Jefford's discussion of the hard body is applicable here as well, because though Mr. Incredible does not embody cowboy masculinity, he is strong, moral, and quite literally a "hardbody" (24). The other members of the Parr family are exceptional as well; Helen Parr can stretch her body great distances, Violet can be both invisible and generate force fields, and Dash is able to run at very high speeds. Neighbors begin to note Bob's exceptionalism, particularly a young boy who waits around to see him do "something amazing I guess" (*The Incredibles*). Bob Parr's superhero name itself, "Mr. Incredible", is indicative of his exceptionalism. Morally, Bob is unparalleled by any other character in the film, even his best friend and fellow super, Frozone. On nights out, the two men tell their wives they are going bowling and then proceed to sit in the car and listen to the police scanner for an emergency in which they can intervene. Frozone (Lucius), however, is reluctant and complains to Bob, "how about, for once, we actually do what our wives think we are doing" (*The Incredibles*). Bob insists that they interfere and rescue victims of a building fire. At work in a large corporate insurance company Bob infuriates his boss because he helps his suffering customers, giving them advice about where to file claims and under which forms. This imperative to help others regardless of superpowers sets Bob, and the family he leads, a generous cut above the rest.



Figure 7. Mr. Incredible lifts train cars for exercise



Figure 8. Bob Parr begins to get into shape after using his powers

The family is superior and they also exemplify many American characteristics. When Bob and Helen marry in the beginning of the film, the background mimics their union by intertwined blue and red stained glass, a positioning that is highly symbolic of both their union and their metaphorical meaning. Even the family's superhero costumes, bright red spandex jumpsuits, denote a family that is decisively and unapologetically American. Hastings Dunn in his brief analysis of the film notes that the Incredibles' "outfits are emblems of who they are" (559). Without superpowers the Parr family, though kind, is economically, educationally, and socially middle-class. Their "whiteness is universalized through the privileged representation of middle-class social relations, values, and linguistic practices" (Giroux 106). Bob works a corporate job in a cubicle, drives home, gets stuck in traffic, and makes appointments to have his car fixed. The Parrs have dinner together after work, they discuss their son's visit to the principal, and they argue about the best ways to raise their three children. They are a white, nuclear, heterosexual, middle class American family. Combined with their powers this family becomes superior, eventually accepting the responsibility that their power bestows on them.

In contrast to the Parr family, Syndrome is an unexceptional threat. He does not have superpowers and instead he designs his own weapons so that he can challenge the strength of real superheroes. Syndrome's costuming also contrasts with the Parrs'; his outfit is black and silver, more dark and threatening. Physically Syndrome cannot compare to Mr. Incredible. He is short in stature, thin, and weak without his inventions. Syndrome does not represent a racialized or culturally otherized threat, but his cruelty "constructs the audience as a sympathizer [with Mr. Incredible] with acts of vengeance" (Ono and Buescher 93). Syndrome's acts of cruelty validate Mr. Incredible's use of violence in the film, positioning the audience to sympathize and condone violence in the face of danger, following the ticking time bomb motif (Downing 76). When

Helen Parr requests landing permission on Syndrome's private island, Syndrome looks over and laughs at Mr. Incredible who is imprisoned in the same room. Over the speaker Helen's voice is heard, "requesting permission to land." Syndrome proceeds to launch the missiles, followed by Helen's worried cry, "there are children on board!" Despite the threat to the lives of innocent children (see fig. 9) Syndrome continues the launch of the heat seeking missiles and dismisses Mr. Incredible, calling him weak. Though Helen and her children do survive because of their superpowers, the cruelty exhibited by Syndrome substantiates the violence the Incredibles must use to liberate themselves from his imprisonment. In this way the audience is offered a position as sympathizers, endorsing violence both because of the morality Bob Parr has already exhibited, and because of the lack that Syndrome portrayed. "Non-state [and in this case, non-protagonist and therefore non-state] terrorist attacks on civilians, as opposed to state-sponsored military attacks on civilians, has become quite successfully defined as the ultimate public horror which justifies new forms of state repressions and violence" (Downing 65) When Mr. Incredible beats up a van of guards, Mrs. Incredible takes down sentries, and Dash causes collisions between guard-driven aircraft, the violence and potential loss of life is necessitated due to circumstance and their positioning as the protagonists. Their violence is justifiable because the audience has already been offered to connect with their motives and responsibility to protect based on exceptionalism and a supposed moral compass. Ultimately the Incredibles must also survive because they have to defeat the giant Omnidroid destroying their city and endangering the lives of powerless innocents.

Hastings Dunn in an analysis of *The Incredibles* argues that there are multiple references to Weapons of Mass Destruction and the atmosphere of post-9/11 fear in the film (2006). He points out the blatant attack on the children in the plane, followed by the subsequent violent

explosion draws on motifs present in American dialogues post-9/11, the threat to children and innocents by powerful weapons out of American control (2006, p. 561). Helen even warns her children that the bad guys will “kill you even though you are children” (*The Incredibles*) suggesting, as Hasting Dunn notes, the stakes are much higher. The destruction scene by the Omnidroid also alludes to post-9/11 fears; the wrecking of havoc on an urban metropolis by advanced foreign weapons. Though Hasting Dunn’s reading of the film is for very direct allusions to the post-9/11 climate, he argues along a similar trajectory: that these threats to innocents by an antagonistic power, whether read metaphorically or not, necessitate the successful intervention by the family of Incredibles.

The Incredibles is a call to action, a film that argues that the exceptional powers of a family, and of a nation, should be used and not forgotten. Similar to



Toy Story 3, the film echoes **Figure 9. Dash looks out the window at Syndrome's missiles headed for the aircraft**

motifs of the United States as international police, using a propensity for power and exceptionalism to save innocents from the threat of destruction. 9/11 “shattered the illusion of U.S. invincibility and made the national dream of exceptionalism from the consequences untenable” (Chappell 317). Following 9/11, U.S. foreign policy reflected this new vulnerability, a national crisis stemming from danger that could be enacted both at home and abroad. In the face of national fear, the call to action becomes crucial to rebuild national narratives of exceptionalism and international responsibility. The narrative of exceptionalism and duty is

central not only to U.S. foreign policy but also to both *The Incredibles* and *Toy Story 3*, as they reproduce and redistribute the emerging cultural scripts that became pertinent in post-9/11 American society. The superhero genre has prospered in the last decade. Sean Treat argues it is “hardly coincidental that superheroes flourish during traumatizing wars abroad and an economic crisis” (105). The super hero in popular culture creates a collective identity that “embodies American identity, hero for the nation, idealized nation and defender of American status quo” (Dittmer 627). Particularly after 9/11, narratives of exceptionalism, intervention, and democratization have become especially important to both boost American confidence after a national disaster, and also to validate foreign policy decisions and actions abroad in the global arena and specifically in the Middle East.

The Jeremiad and Cars

Cars is about the journey of a racecar Lightning McQueen and his dream of winning the Piston Cup and a sponsorship with Dinoco. After a three-way tie with Dinoco’s current sponsor and nemesis Chick Hicks, McQueen sets off to travel to the final race for the Piston Cup in California. On the way a sleeping McQueen is lost by his transport trailer and wakes up in the middle of nowhere. Panicking, McQueen zooms down an obscure road looking for Route 66, but is chased by a police officer and ends up in jail in Radiator Springs for tearing up their main stretch of road. The judge of the small town, Doc Hudson, strikes a deal with McQueen: he can leave in time to race in the Piston Cup if he patches the road. While in Radiator Springs McQueen learns about the community and the hardships the residents suffered when Route 66 diverted travelers. McQueen also learns that Doc Hudson is actually the legendary Hudson Hornet, famous Piston Cup winner. Thanks to the lessons in compassion, humility, and also racing, McQueen leaves Radiator Springs ready to win his sponsorship. The town of Radiator

Springs follows to support him, eventually taking a place as his pit crew. Because of the story Doc Hudson told McQueen, about how his accident on the track made him irrelevant and uncared for, McQueen finishes the race last to help his old competitor cross the finish line. Though he lost, McQueen is still offered the sponsorship, which he turns down in favor of the company that supported him before he was famous. The film finishes with McQueen returning to Radiator Springs and declaring it his official training location, giving the small town business and customers once again.

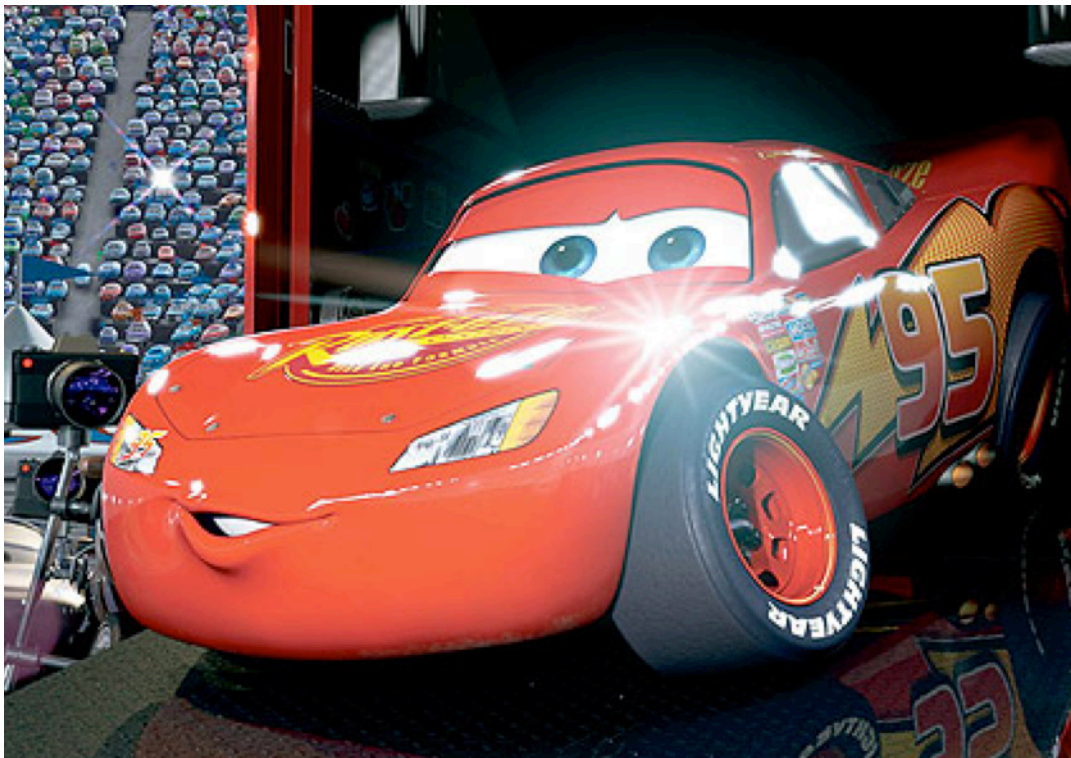


Figure 9. McQueen emerges to fans

Whether McQueen is exceptional is without question. The opening scene of the movie glorifies his appearance and speed, following flashbulb moments that trace McQueen's sleek outline and shiny surface (see fig. 10). Neither fan nor competitor denies his speed and talent as a rookie, but he is not perfect. Unlike Woody in *Toy Story 3* and Bob Parr in *The Incredibles*, McQueen is not morally superior to begin with, and his cocky attitude and self importance

isolate the racecar from making friends and retaining his entire pit crew. Without a visit to Radiator Springs McQueen would have remained an imperfect protagonist, but the process of learning about self and others in the small town transforms his flaws. During his stay McQueen falls in love with Sally and becomes best friends with Mater, a rusty old tow truck. They both teach him about what Radiator Springs used to be like when cars making their way cross-country stopped for fuel and new tires, and kept the economy and the resident cars of Radiator Springs alive. The bond McQueen forges with the residents of Radiator Springs teaches him compassion for others. Even McQueen's already exceptional racing skills are improved during his visit. Doc Hudson teaches him to turn on dirt and gravel, a skill McQueen uses during the Piston Cup to avoid being thrown out of the race. The transformative nature of the American heartland in *Cars* is a call home to the mythic American past, an integration of the new and the old, and the passing down of ideals from one generation (Doc Hudson), to another (Lightning McQueen).



Figure 10. Radiator Springs

The American jeremiad issues a call home in response to a straying from the path (Owen 249). The jeremiad is originally a rhetorical device that has been used in popular discourse to cope with instances of national trauma, and it has “three rhetorical functions”: “to name the

covenant (the special people), to make public lamentation for a decline (falling away from a promise), and to imagine redemption (connect the past to the future)” (Owen 252). As Owen notes, the “formal logic of the jeremiad can frame any contemporary malaise as a falling away from a mythic past” (253). The plot of *Cars*, where Lightning McQueen learns from the past to bring about a better future, mimics the cinematic jeremiad and issues a call home to the glorified past. Lightning McQueen is the embodiment of the “special people”, the physically superior protagonist but with some serious flaws. McQueen in many ways represents a younger generation, moving into the world with little appreciation for others and his own history. This signifies a falling away from the past. To imagine redemption McQueen must embrace the lessons taught to him at Radiator Springs from older cars and most importantly, by Doc Hudson, the teacher that transforms McQueen into a responsible and morally equipped individual. In fact, *Cars* is a jeremiad that passes down foundational principles and connects the “mythic past” with the future by ensuring it reaches the generation that will carry it forward. Significant for *Cars* is its embodiment of the dichotomy between old and new, the future and the past. Radiator Springs is the epitome of the “real America”, the heartland of hardworking blue-collar workers (see fig. 11). As noted in the film, the mythic American past has fallen away, long forgotten by the fast pace of newer generations. The call to home signifies the importance of the real America and the identity derived from it; the lessons to be learned and revitalized by younger generations stemming from the values it has to share. “In order to ensure a harmonious or glorious future, the community must embrace the past” (Owen 253). *Cars* is important because it is the most clear embodiment in post-9/11 animated film of Owen’s archetype for the cinematic jeremiad, but all three films discussed in this paper connect the past to the future in order to avoid a falling away.

Passing on Values to Younger Generations

In *Toy Story 3*, the democracy that Woody and the other toys embody perseveres through changing social pressures. With the transition of Andy from boyhood to adulthood comes the transition of the childhood toys from necessary to unnecessary. Resigned to their fate, the toys climb into a box destined for storage and disuse. Woody, however, writes the address of a young girl whom he was picked up by earlier in the film, and Andy takes the toys to her address. The significance of the scene is both in the resemblance between Andy and Bonnie, and in the importance of finally giving away Woody as a symbol of the endurance of democracy.



Figure 12. Andy gives away Woody to Bonnie

In the opening scene of the movie, Andy as a child plays with the toys and sends them on adventures about heists, spaceships, and evil villains. Similarly, Bonnie plays with her toys in an identical manner, using spaceships, adventures and a comparable narrative style. Andy and Bonnie have similar ways of interacting with the toys, and they also physically resemble one another. Furthermore, Bonnie is the character that saves Woody from being stuck in a tree at

Sunnyside, and therefore also plays a role in the ultimate success of the toys' escape. Bonnie is a younger version of Andy, similar enough to truly value the toys but young enough for them to still have use. When Andy arrives and gives Bonnie the toys, there is a moment in which he chooses to pass on Woody to the younger generation (see fig. 12). Symbolically, Andy (the past America) passes on the emblem of American exceptionalism and democracy that Woody has embodied throughout the film to Bonnie (the future America).



Figure 13. The Family of Incredibles unites

In *The Incredibles*, the torch of duty to protect not only themselves but also others finally falls onto the children of the Parr family as they are just realizing their own strength. Sitting in a cave after the airplane was blown up, Helen explains to her children that the time has come not to hold back their powers, “remember the bad guys...will not have restraint, if given the chance they will kill you” and “if the time comes you will know what to do” (*The Incredibles*). The superpowers are in their blood, but Dash and Violet learn from their parents how to use their

power for good and for the protection of others. The duty to protect must be passed down to newer generations, and by the conclusion of the movie Violet and Dash have fully realized their powers and work with their parents to fight the Omnidroid and Syndrome (see fig. 13). The symbolic younger generations of Americans have realized their potential for exceptionalism and have begun to enact it upon the world. Each inheritance of values from the past to the future highlights the importance of the narratives that they embody: democracy, exceptionalism, and the mythic American identity and past. These narratives emerge increasingly in times of crisis, comforting and healing wounds caused by a national loss of identity and purpose after the events of 9/11.

Conclusion

Toy Story 3, *The Incredibles*, and *Cars* are important not because they can be read as metaphors for America. Instead they are highly relevant because they reiterate common stories, morals, and beliefs that circulate in U.S. society and that have become more prevalent as a result of national trauma stemming from 9/11. The creation and formulation of national identity becomes increasingly important in instances of national falling away and national crisis; 9/11 and the resulting “war on terror” was arguably one of the biggest American crises since the Vietnam War. Just as Sturken argues that the Vietnam War and the resulting “Vietnam syndrome” was a “disease that prevented the government from displaying strength” (Sturken, “Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering” 123) and in turn legitimated a cinematic jeremiad response with films like *Saving Private Ryan* to heal the pain and disillusion spread by the war (Owen), films like *Toy Story 3*, *The Incredibles*, and *Cars* emerge post-9/11 for similar reasons. They provide scripts about democracy and exceptionalism for national identity and comfort and evoke a jeremiad-like theme.

Importantly, the accessibility of film disseminates dominant cultural stories and meanings to large audiences while also creating distance between true events and the implicit meaning of films. Innocence in animated film provides the opportunity for people to see themselves as the agents of history and to become receptive of popular culture and formation of national identity (Giroux, "*From Mouse to Mermaid*" 46-48). It is not to say that children's' movies directly reflect or retell a story of 9/11 and the ensuing "war on terror", but rather that cultural scripts and values are powerful and are reflected in mediums as innocent as animated films. These narratives were certainly present in American society and cinema much before the events of 9/11, but they have grown because they are part of political and social conversations currently circulating in American society, reiterated through the medium of film for a broad audience. Much like oral stories that retell traditions, these films retell dominant cultural narratives that become increasingly important in time of trauma such as the post-9/11 period in the United States.

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